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# ISRAEL'S DEFENSE AS GOOD AS EVER?

By Drew Middleton

**Y**OU ARE NEVER VERY FAR FROM THE sights and sounds of war in Israel. A tank waddles into a field beside the highway that leads from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Young soldiers, returning from leave, stand at every intersection thumbing rides back to their units. As dawn breaks, three fighters thunder north toward Lebanon. Tanks and infantry move cautiously along the roads beyond the frontier, alert to surprise Moslem attacks.

Israel is a country at peace, desperately hoping for continued peace. But Israel lives in the shadow of past and future wars and new doubts of the future are being fed by anxiety over the Israel Defense Forces. The concern stems from the knowledge that the I.D.F. emerged from the 1982 campaign in Lebanon and the long agony of the about-to-be-concluded occupation that followed with its reputation as the finest fighting force in the Middle East diminished.

Until recently, friends in the West had considered Israel's forces virtually invincible. They still feel that at its core the I.D.F., comprising the Army, Air Force and a small but efficient Navy, remains a tough fighting force commanded by intelligent, experienced officers. But they take a gloomier view of its prospects in future conflicts. They base their judgment on the I.D.F.'s overall performance during the last three years, its present

organization and command structure and the expected impact of budget cuts on all three of Israel's armed services.

Much of what has triggered such pessimism was evident during a recent visit to Israeli defense units in the field and in talks with Israeli and foreign military experts. While it is difficult for knowledgeable observers to believe that Israel will ever actually be overrun by her enemies, the experts are, nevertheless, disturbed by the prospect of Israel having to stave off aggressors with a diminished, even inadequate, capability. Harsh economic realities, primarily an annual

inflation rate of 445 percent, have necessitated a shift from desired quantitative to qualitative improvement at a time when various hostile states — notably Syria, the likeliest potential enemy — are able to upgrade their weaponry and the training of their armed forces.

IT WAS VERY COLD IN THE BEKAA VALLEY OF eastern Lebanon earlier this year when I witnessed an armored unit carrying out a firing exercise. The young Hungarian-born major commanding held a stopwatch on the tanks as they came out of a ravine and fired at a

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moving target. Their aim was not as good as it might have been. After the major shouted an order to halt the exercise he turned to his visitor and said, "They'll have to do better than that against the Syrians next time — and they will."

Time is the vital factor. Even as Israel's armed services struggle to compensate for the limitations placed on them, their Arab enemies, both active and passive, are reducing the I.D.F.'s margin of superiority in high-tech weapons and command and control procedures.

Israel's chief tactical reform in the light of the 1982 war in Lebanon, Western military experts say, should be tighter coordination among its ground services and its air force. There were too many instances during that war, the analysts say, when Israeli tanks or infantry fought alone without the employment of what the United States Army refers to as the all-arms concept, by which air squadrons, armor, infantry, artillery and combat engineers fight as a team under the direction of a single ground commander. This concept, doctrine in the American forces, is now being adopted by the forces of many NATO nations but has yet to be accepted by the I.D.F.

A related problem is organizational. In the view of several Western experts who have monitored operations in the Middle East for many years, the Israelis have never fully exploited the use of the helicopter for the transportation of troops in battle. One reason for their reluctance may be that their helicopters "belong" to the air force, and individual services are invariably wary about transferring resources to another service. Still, while helicopters are always vulnerable, the Israeli air force has always been able to establish local air superiority and so could be relied on to safely escort troops.

Finally, there is the morale factor. In previous wars, when Israeli forces were fighting invaders, their high morale impressed foes and friends alike. During the short war in Lebanon in 1982, however, there was an evident slackening of spirit. It was by no means universal. And its effect on performance was marginal. But morale did deteriorate, and according to many Israelis, the deterioration was rooted in the feeling that in invading Lebanon the I.D.F. was going be-

yond its basic function — the defense of Israel.

Such feelings were encouraged by the many Israelis who opposed the war and have been exacerbated by a prolonged occupation, punctuated by violent clashes. Some citizen soldiers refused orders to serve in Lebanon (for which a few were imprisoned), a situation unprecedented in the history of Israel. During my talks with Israeli troops in Lebanon, soldiers emphasized their distaste for occupation duties and spoke of the hidden dangers they faced — a grenade rolled at them from the center of a crowd, terrorists concealed behind bushes.

Another serious problem faced by Yitzhak Rabin, the Minister of Defense, and Lieut. Gen. Moshe Levy, the I.D.F.'s Chief of Staff, is the impact of the cuts in the Israeli defense budget on the armed forces' effectiveness. A knowledgeable Israeli reserve officer concedes that the I.D.F. "will have to cut a lot of fat and, possibly, some muscle."

Such cuts will inevitably affect the order of battle, the number of divisions, brigades and air squadrons immediately available in the event of a military crisis verging on war.

One Israeli reserve officer told me during a meal shared at a restaurant in Jerusalem that it would also be necessary to "streamline" military personnel, a move likely to involve the enforced retire-

ment of some combat-experienced majors and lieutenant colonels. While the full impact of such a move cannot be weighed until specifics of the defense budget are revealed, a reduction in force would almost certainly make an appreciable difference in combat readiness. But my source believed that because of the I.D.F.'s increasing dependence on advanced technology, special efforts would be made to retain those officers with expertise in the development of new weapons, warning systems and communications.

According to Israeli officials in Washington, the new budget will amount to about \$5.75 billion, or approximately 25 percent of the gross national product. (The allocation of funds to the three services, which is done by the Cabinet's Security Committee, is classified information and is not discussed in the Knesset, Israel's parliament.)

In comparison, Syria spent \$3.2 billion on defense in 1984; Jordan, approximately \$480 million, and Egypt, in the last reported year, 1983, \$3.04 billion.

One economy known to be under active consideration, according to another Israeli military source, is the transfer of one of the three armored divisions now on active duty to reserve status. Experts calculate that it costs about \$60 million a year to maintain an Israeli armored division on active status but only a fifth of that sum when a division is in reserve. So the savings would be significant. Monetary savings must, however, be balanced against military disadvantages, for a transfer in status would mean that the division would not be fully manned or in an operational status.

Air force officers expressed fears that budget cuts may have an adverse effect on their training programs, should flying time be reduced, as seems likely, to well below the 20 hours a month NATO air forces estimate is needed to keep pilots at top pitch.

Maintaining its air force at peak capacity is vital for Israel, whose borders with its enemies are only minutes away by air. Yet high fuel costs make the air force the most expensive armed service. The annual cost for a single squadron is estimated at between \$45 million and \$50 million. One Israeli military expert pointed out that the funds needed to maintain three active fighter squadrons for a year just about equaled Israel's entire expenditure for education. Thus, he feared, the Government might be tempted to put one or more of Israel's active squadrons on reserve.

The I.D.F.'s response to the threat that budget cuts would reduce the flow of new weapons into Israel has been to upgrade existing systems. The range of the 155-millimeter field gun, for example, is to be extended and its ammunition improved by the introduction of a bigger propellant into shells. When the plan is fully implemented, by the middle of 1986, the Israelis will have equipped all their American-built M-60A3 tanks with the latest guns and firing systems. And all their F-4 Phantom jets will have been modernized by the addition of advanced engines and weapons.

Israeli economists, industrialists and journalists emphasize that in a situation of economic crisis, the military, until now favored in the drawing up of budgets, must

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tighten its belt and take cuts along with other Government departments. However, the explosive situation in the Middle East and the steady improvement in the forces of potential enemies will probably influence the extent of the I.D.F. cuts.

Meanwhile, the military is also upgrading the efficiency of the air and ground early-warning systems that

would signal the mobilization or movement of hostile armies and air forces. The West Bank, facing Jordan, is now studded with warning systems. And Israeli drones (pilotless reconnaissance aircraft) and manned scout planes maintain constant patrols along all frontiers.

In an emergency, the Israelis expect that they will also have access,

as in the past, to American satellite photographs showing enemy troop movements. But that advantage, they know, will be offset under similar circumstances by the Syrians receiving photos of Israeli movements from the Soviet Union.

The resolve to maintain training standards for reduced forces and the efforts to improve the performance of

tanks, guns and aircraft have not, in general, stilled the note of apprehension that surfaces whenever Israelis discuss Arab forces.

**S**INCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the Jewish state 37 years ago, Israel has consistently been able to defy or defeat quantitatively superior Arab forces through qualitative superiority in weapons, technology and manpower.

But now, according to Aharon Yariv, a retired major general who headed Israeli military intelligence from 1964 to 1972, "In view of the diminishing advantage in the quality of its weapons systems and the difficult manpower and financial constraints under which it operates, Israel must be prepared to forego a further expansion of force levels and to concentrate on qualitative improvement."

The I.D.F., another Israeli general explained, "must think not only in terms of the immediate potential enemy" — Syria — "but about other Arab states whose qualitative strength is improving daily as a result of arms deliveries from the United States and other Western countries, as well as the Soviet Union."

The United States is frequently and bitterly criticized by Israelis for weapons sales to Arab countries. One widely-quoted estimate is that the military establishments of all Arab nations, with the exception of Egypt, have acquired about \$60 billion in arms since the 1973 war, and that about 60 percent of these weapons have been supplied by Western nations, notably France, Britain and the United States. (Since its treaty with Israel, Egypt has not been considered by the United States as one of what the Israelis call "the confrontation states" of the Middle East and consequently has qualified for significant American military assistance.)

Israeli military and civilian officials are well aware that American aid to their nation, amounting to \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 1984-1985 and scheduled to be \$1.8 billion in 1985-1986, is likely to be criticized in the United States — by Congress, which is seeking to limit American defense spending; by the armed services, which face pension reductions, and by the general public, wary over proposed cuts in Social Security and other domestic programs. A visitor gets the impression, however, that Israeli leaders, aware of their country's strategic importance to American interests in the Middle East, believe that the aid will be delivered.

At present, the total armed forces of Israel consist of about 170,000 men and women. Mobilization would raise the total to about 540,000, of whom 100,000 could be expected to report for duty in about 24 hours.

Increasingly, new conscripts include large numbers of Jews from North Africa, whose assimilation into Israeli society has sometimes been difficult. But none of the more than two dozen general officers whom I interviewed during my stay in Israel had any doubts about the I.D.F.'s ca-

capacity to absorb and train these Sephardic Jews, now a sizable percentage of the country's population. One general said they have, in fact, been surprisingly easy to train, and that after years spent under Arab rule, many of them "are extremely aggressive."

The army, the largest Israeli service, has an active strength of 130,000 men and women, augmented under mobilization by 310,000 reserves. The air force has 30,000 regulars and 50,000 reserves. The navy, the smallest service, has 10,000 regulars and 10,000 reserves.

army would be able to field 11 armored divisions, 15 independent infantry brigades and five airborne brigades. In addition, Western intelligence sources estimate that the Israeli army, which has relied on massive firepower in four victorious wars, can now deploy 3,600 tanks, a figure that includes a growing number of versatile Merkava battle tanks.

Out of necessity, Israeli industry has become adept at modernizing its older tanks, such as the British Centurion, and renovating captured armor, chiefly Soviet T-54/55's and T-62's. These tanks would enter battle accompanied by 8,000 armored reconnaissance vehicles and personnel carriers.

Israeli artillery includes approximately 1,000 guns, ranging downward from the 203-millimeter self-propelled howitzer and the 175-millimeter self-propelled gun.

The Israeli air force now numbers about 555 combat aircraft. The quality of its pilots and command and control structure is legendary in the Middle East. The initial attacks on Egyptian airfields in the 1967 war are universally acknowledged to have decided that war before it really had a chance to get rolling.

Today, the air force, which also includes 60 armed helicopters, relies on American aircraft, especially F-15 and F-16 fighters and, to a lesser extent, on the Kfir, an Israeli-manufactured fighter-bomber.

The navy, though it had put forward a modernization program, is apparently scheduled to make do with its present fleet, which includes three British-built submarines; 23 fast, missile-armed patrol boats; one missile-armed hydrofoil; 47 patrol craft, and 15 landing craft and two support ships.

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ONLY SYRIA CONSTITUTES an immediate and significant threat to Israel," contends General Yariv. Israeli experts think that Syria now has the wherewithal to fight a 14-day war without massive infusions of weapons, ammunition and fuel from the Soviet Union. General Yariv and other military experts believe, moreover, that Syria is receiving further arms deliveries, which will increase its ability to extend that time frame.

Once these new Soviet weapons are absorbed into use, the possibility of a Syrian surprise attack is taken seriously by Israeli planners. The Syrians' first priority, the Israelis believe, would be to try to regain the Golan Heights, lost to Israel in the 1967 war.

Syria's greatest advantage lies in the numerical strength of its mobilized regular forces. Last year, an additional infantry division was formed out of commando units, so that even prior to mobilization, Syria can now deploy nine divisions, plus independent brigade groups of airborne and special forces. Its regular forces total 300,000, with another 350,000 army reserves. The air force has 650 combat aircraft of which, Western analysts report, about 300 are of advanced types. Air force personnel strength before mobilization is 90,000 men, with another 37,500 in reserve.

The Syrians are considered stubborn and skillful fighters by Israeli soldiers and airmen, despite the fact that in the past they have suffered from the inflexibility of their military doctrine, acquired from their Soviet instructors. One Israeli officer I met spoke highly of the conduct of a Syrian infantry battalion during the war in Lebanon. It was inferior in firepower and numbers to the attacking Israelis, he noted, but had stood its ground and inflicted casualties on the attackers.

A decade ago, Israeli planners would have viewed Syria's numerical superiority with equanimity. Today, aware of the rising technological level of equipment in the hands of Syrian troops and of those in other Arab countries, they are far from complacent.

These Soviet-supplied weapons, intelligence officers point out, are simpler to use and maintain than more sophisticated American arms.

The sources also emphasize that Syria has made a major effort to retain technicians in its forces and has instituted a program to train additional ones in technical institutions at home and in the Soviet Union.

The weapon-absorption process has been speeded up by an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 Soviet advisers and technicians, who have been active from the basic battalion level upwards. Recent intelligence reports note slight reductions in the number of Soviet advisers in Syria, but they point out that the reductions may be temporary and due to the rotation of officers and non-commissioned officers between the Soviet Union and Syria.

Soviet deliveries of aircraft and antiaircraft missiles present a serious problem, Israeli air force officers assert. In late 1982 and early 1983, Russia sent the Syrians 50 advanced aircraft, including MIG-25's and SU-20's, equipped with additional firepower and more sophisticated radar. Israeli and Western intelligence experts believe that still more aircraft, perhaps another 50, have been delivered during the last 18 months. The Soviet Union is also known to have linked the Syrian air command and control system with a major Russian command center in the southern U.S.S.R. This link is seen by Western analysts more as a means of keeping the Soviet air command in touch with operations in any future Middle East war than as a source of Soviet resupply in a crisis.

Equally important to Israel's military future has been the Soviet delivery of surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles. The Syrians now deploy SS-21 missiles, non-nuclear weapons with the capacity to knock out Israel's seaports, oil reserve depots and communications centers. A decade ago, the Israeli answer to such a development would have been to raid the missile sites. Today, however, the I.D.F. must take into account a significantly improved Syrian air defense system, which now includes 48 or more SA-5 surface-to-air missiles, whose range and accuracy are greater than the more than 100 mobile batteries of Soviet missiles already deployed. In view of this, Israel could expect high losses in any raid.

The ability of Syria's economy to maintain an enlarged military structure for a protracted period of time is questioned by Israeli experts. Their conclusions are based on Syria's reduced financial support from the Persian Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, which are now heavily supporting Iraq's war with Iran.

Some Israeli experts, however, conclude that there is no reason to believe that Syria's military expansion has placed an unbearable strain on the national economy and that it is unlikely to do so for the next four or five years.

**S**YRIA IS THE MOST obvious and urgent threat to Israel, but there are others, foremost among them, Jordan.

Given the I.D.F.'s combat experience, and its training and weaponry, it is difficult for a foreigner to consider Jordan a real menace. But Israeli military spokesmen are given to extolling the high fighting quality of the Jordanian Army. They also stress the importance of deliveries of American Cobra helicopters and Maverick air-to-ground missiles and remind visitors that the West Bank, and other targets within Israel, such as Jerusalem, are well within range of Jordan's heavy guns.

Although a Jordanian offensive to recover the West Bank, probably in concert with a Syrian attack on the Golan Heights, is a possibility, it is, to my mind, a remote one. Some Israelis see a greater danger. They fear that the assimilation of the West Bank into Israel could promote the type of fierce intramural guerrilla warfare that has torn Northern Ireland apart for so many years.

Jordan is also seen by the Israelis as participating in the general Arab campaign to reduce Israel's superiority in the air. In 1973, the Royal Jordanian Air Force had 50 combat aircraft. Today, it has 103, by Western intelligence estimates; 120, by Israeli calculations. In addition, the Jordanians are now absorbing French Mirage F-1 fighters and improved American Hawk surface-to-air missiles.

An even more serious threat to Israel's security could come from Iraq, should it succeed in winning the Gulf War. The Iraqi Army and Air Force, tempered by five

years of war against Iran and armed largely by the Soviet Union, would be a powerful element in any anti-Israeli alliance.

In the past, such Arab alliances have not lasted long, but while they have, an Israeli military expert says, "they are lethal."

The Iraqi army, which deployed seven divisions in 1973, now has 20 divisions, lavishly equipped with just under 5,000 Soviet, Chinese and Rumanian tanks and Soviet field guns, howitzers and heavy and light mortars. And a new generation of French fighter aircraft is joining the Iraqi air force. So Israeli military planners are understandably worried about the effect of an Iraqi victory over Iran on the balance of power in the Middle East. They are equally concerned by the effect a possible peace between the two powers would have on that balance of power.

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The latter could mean, Israeli planners contend, the addition of at least 10 Iraqi divisions and 150 combat aircraft to the Arab side. The divisions would, the Israelis believe, be as good as any Syrian divisions. And the reinforcement would, of course, increase the odds against Israel.

An Iranian victory over Iraq is considered unlikely. Iraq has better weapons, better-trained personnel and a far more effective air force. But Israeli intelligence sources say such a victory would only add to Israel's problems. Islamic fundamentalism, inflamed by victory, would influence Shiite Moslems in Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon. One result could be a series of fierce internal struggles. Another could be a jihad, or holy war, against Israel.

"That is perhaps a 50-to-1 chance," a veteran Israeli intelligence officer told me as we sat in a bar in Tel Aviv. "But we in Israel, we have to weigh every chance, actual and potential, in the military balance. We have no margin for error.

"For example, we can't rule out a sudden change in Egyptian policy," he continued. "The Camp David agreement and the withdrawal from the Sinai would appear to put our two countries on the path of peace. But Egypt, like all Arab countries, is prone to political convulsions. We do not know what road a new Egyptian president might take."

The I.D.F. assumption is that Egypt will not be a military threat for at least the

next two to four years. During that period, Israeli intelligence foresees Egyptian forces replacing Soviet weapons and doctrine with those of the United States. When that process is completed, the Israelis believe, Egypt will be a far more formidable military power than it was in 1973, the last time the two clashed in battle.

The Egyptians are acquiring from the United States and Britain M-60A3 tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled 155-millimeter howitzers, TOW and Swing-fire antitank missiles. And their air force has on order, or is already receiving, American F-16 fighters and French Mirage-2000 fighters.

**T**HE BOTTOM LINE, after assessing present Israeli strengths and weaknesses, the probable impact of budget cuts on national military readiness and the expanding strength of Arab forces, is that the I.D.F. is still the most powerful force in the Middle East.

While there is abundant evidence that the Arab nations, particularly Syria, Iraq and Egypt, are overcoming the long-established Israeli lead in military technology, there

is no doubt in my mind that the Israeli forces, man for man, are at present superior in experience, training and weapons than any Arab state.

Yet every experienced Israeli soldier consulted during my visit firmly believes that because of the growing Arab strength any new war would test Israel as it has not been tested since its War of Independence 37 years ago.

Despite the political convulsions and military problems presented by the war in Lebanon and the subsequent occupation, the resolution of the Israeli armed services to defend their country appears strong.

"Defend" is the operative word. It is difficult to see the post-Lebanon generation of Israelis invading an enemy country. It is equally difficult to see them failing to smash an invader. But there can be no doubt that as Arab military power expands, Israel will face a hazardous period.

In the end, the Israelis know that their salvation and security are in their hands and their hands alone. And they find little consolation in the knowledge that those hands are not now as full as they would like with what is necessary for their survival. ■